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Committee on Conferences
Substantive session of 2003

Draft report

Addendum

Rapporteur: Mr. Andrius **Namavičius** (Lithuania)

V. Improving the performance of the Department for General Assembly and Conference Management

Introduction and overview

1. At its 451st and 452nd meetings, on 8 September 2003, the Committee on Conferences considered the report of the Secretary-General on the reform of the Department for General Assembly and Conference Management (A/58/213). In introducing the report, the Under-Secretary-General for General Assembly and Conference Management noted that implementation of the Department's comprehensive and results-oriented reform plan was in full swing. The Department's budgetary position was sound and more rational meeting schedules had led to better smoother meetings programmes, utilization of resources and higher staff morale. Enforcement of the slotting system had resulted in initial improvement in the documents situation and in enhanced awareness on the part of author departments of the need for timely submission. The *Journal* was now a convenient tool for accessing information on meetings and meeting-related documents. The electronic meetings planning system (e-Meets) was operational and was soon to be expanded, while the electronic documentation processing system (e-Conveyor) had been tested and a prototype was expected to be operational by the end of 2003. Considerable attention was also being paid to enhancing synergy and extending it beyond the Department to include the other Secretariat entities and intergovernmental bodies.

2. Building on its success, the Department was embarking on a number of major new projects, including a comprehensive study on the integrated global management of conference-related resources covering the four duty stations to be undertaken in collaboration with the Office of Internal Oversight Services (OIOS) and with the full involvement of the duty stations. The study was aimed at developing guidelines for integrated global management that were consistent with the applicable legislative

and administrative mandates, and would also recommend an operating model for the central monitoring and coordination mechanisms.

3. In response to General Assembly resolution 57/283 B, in which the Assembly had recognized the need to develop or update existing workload standards so as to reflect functions performed by language staff not currently included in those standards, the Department had also established a task force to undertake a comprehensive review of existing workload standards and performance measurements. A crucial issue in that respect was the relationship between the introduction of technological innovations and productivity gains and the related issue of return on investment.

4. In implementing the slotting system, it had become clear that the length of reports was no less important for the success of the system than submission dates. The Department would therefore continue to strictly enforce the limits on the length of reports originating in the Secretariat and would set up a task force to look at ways of dealing with reports that were not within the purview of the Secretary-General.

5. Reform was a dynamic process, however, which could be affected by unforeseeable organizational, financial, technical and human factors. Consequently, during the process of implementation, the plan was being fine-tuned or even modified on the basis of experience gained and lessons learned.

Discussion

Repositioning the Department

6. The view was expressed that the new results-driven approach to conference management should not obscure the fact that the function of the Department was to provide a range of services to the intergovernmental bodies. The need for the Department to react to the demands of those bodies must therefore be reconciled with its new proactive approach. It was explained that the Department fully recognized the need for balance. The ability to plan ahead, however, enabled it to deliver its services more effectively and within its budget.

7. Satisfaction was expressed at the curtailment of night and weekend meetings and at the initial improvement in the timeliness of submission of documents by author entities. Further improvement, however, was still needed.

8. While some members welcomed the Department's efforts to reduce documentation and enhance efficiency through the consolidation of reports, others were of the view that the Department was required to follow existing mandates in the area of conference management and that the consolidation of reports was not within its purview. It was explained that, while the Department sought, where possible, to combine reports of a similar nature, it did so without eliminating mandates and, where necessary, with the authorization of the body concerned.

Pursuing full-system benefits

9. A number of questions were asked about the transition to an electronic documentation workflow (e-flow), including how adjustments to the sequence of processing in the documents-processing chain had affected the way in which editors worked. It was explained that e-flow involved the electronic transmission of

documents as well as related reference material and terminology in all official languages through every stage of the documents-processing chain so as to reduce the time required to move documents down the processing line and, in some instances, to reduce workload downstream. The Department had issued operational guidelines that made computer skills a necessary requirement for all newly recruited staff involved in the documents chain and had developed a detailed training plan for permanent staff members.

10. Support was expressed for the integration of the technical-servicing secretariats of the Fifth and Sixth Committees into the Department as a way to enhance their efficiency. The contrary view was also expressed, however, that delegations were satisfied with the current performance of the technical secretariats and failed to understand the rationale for their integration into the Department.

Integrating global management

11. In response to questions about the extent to which the integrated management of conference-related resources had succeeded in making the fullest and most rational use of available resources across duty stations, it was pointed out that the calendar of conferences and meetings approved by the General Assembly remained the most authoritative tool for the management of meetings. Other factors to be taken into account were the headquarters rule and the other costs associated with holding meetings at duty stations away from Headquarters. The availability of conference services was not the only consideration, especially if peaks in demand at a given duty station could be met from within the existing conference-servicing capacity of that duty station. The comprehensive study which the Department had launched in cooperation with OIOS to devise a practical approach to integrated global management based on a broad consensus among the concerned duty stations of what was desirable and practicable was due to be completed in December 2003. The view was also expressed that, independently of the process of integrating global management, those principles and methods that had proven to be successful should be applied across duty stations.

12. In response to the question of whether the use of two incompatible information tracking systems, the Electronic Document Registration and Information Tracking System (e-DRITS) and the integrated Documents Control and Productivity Monitoring System (iDCPMS), was an obstacle to the integration of global management across duty stations, it was explained that the Department's ability to plan and to communicate had in no way been hindered.

Optimizing the use of technology

13. See chapter VI, "Information technology".

Alleviating the documentation situation

14. An assessment was requested of the initial results of the implementation of the slotting system. It was pointed out that, while adjustments were still being made to the system, which had been introduced only the previous year, the Secretariat had generally responded to the pressure to meet slotting deadlines. As an upstream planning mechanism, the system was demonstrating that long-term planning was better than short-term reacting.

15. It was noted with satisfaction that in the first five months of 2003, over 90 per cent of reports originating in the Secretariat had been submitted in accordance with the established page limits. Given the high per page cost of processing documentation, however, the need for a 100 per cent compliance rate was emphasized.

16. Deep concern was expressed over the fact that, in an era of instant communications and fast-paced international relations, when, in order to be relevant, information needed to be transmitted instantly to capitals, summary records continued to be produced so late as to be useless for any purpose other than as a historical record. Unlike verbatim records and press releases, summary records had become a marginal product of the Department that was little used by Member States and indeed slowed down the reform process. Press releases, however, were not an acceptable substitute for summary records since they were not subject to the rule governing the simultaneous issuance of official documents in all six official languages. Similarly, given the Organization's other more urgent priorities, providing the six Translation Services with additional resources for the translation of summary records was out of the question. The Assembly should therefore conduct a thorough cost-benefit analysis of the current approach to summary records, consider alternative approaches and review the list of bodies entitled to such records. The view was also expressed that the statement made in paragraph 42 of the report of the Secretary-General that the Assembly had not approved the Secretary-General's proposal for a study to be conducted on the potential of low-cost searchable digital recordings on the proceedings of meetings was not an accurate reflection of the Assembly's position on the matter.

17. It was pointed out that summary records were always prepared on time in the original language. The delay arose because of the chronic lack of capacity to translate them into the other five official languages. In view of the prohibitive cost of increasing that capacity to the required level, the Secretariat sought the Assembly's guidance on how the problem should be addressed since it could not unilaterally withdraw the entitlement to summary records that had been established by the General Assembly, the Economic and Social Council and the Security Council for their respective subsidiary bodies.

18. It was pointed out that the pilot project for concordance of draft resolutions prior to their adoption by the plenary would be expanded to the Fourth and Sixth Committees. The current working methods of the other main committees and the plenary made it difficult to envisage the concordance of their draft resolutions prior to their adoption by the General Assembly. Since there was little time between adoption in the main committee and action by the plenary, the remaining committees could adopt the corresponding draft resolutions after they had completed their consideration of the item from which it emanated.

Ensuring high-quality performance in the course of reform

19. Emphasis was placed on the need to ensure that the drive for greater efficiency and economies did not result in a decline in the quality of the service that the Department provided to Member States. The view was expressed that the Group of 77 and China did not always receive a level of service commensurate with its size and importance in the Organization. Commitment to high quality must be an inherent aspect of the Department's reform. In that connection, information was

sought on the productivity gains resulting from greater efficiencies and the introduction of information technology that had permitted economies to be realized. In response, it was pointed out that the Department was committed to its mandate, which was to provide high-quality service as efficiently as possible. None of the savings realized had been the result of a lowering of the quality of service.

20. On the question of the current workload standards for language staff, satisfaction was expressed at the establishment of a task force to conduct a comprehensive study covering all major language-related functions, including interpretation and translation. Any new standards should include quantitative measurements of some kind and should reflect the gains in productivity that should accrue from investments in information technology for language staff. Pending the introduction of new standards, however, the existing standards must be observed.

21. Note was taken with satisfaction of the series of language-specific consultations organized by the Department in May 2003 to facilitate discussions between its language services and interested delegations on the terminology used at the United Nations. It was pointed out that, with specific reference to Chinese, the terminology used in the Organization did not always reflect current usage. Those consultations could also be used to initiate a dialogue between delegations and interpreters on issues relating to the quality of interpretation.

22. Assurances were sought from the Department that documents would be equally accessible in all official languages under the e-Flow system. It was pointed out that the system was used for the internal flow of manuscripts in the original language of submission. At the end of the processing chain, documents were issued in all of the official languages.

23. There was general support and agreement expressed concerning the conclusions contained in paragraphs 51-53 of the report (A/58/213) concerning the direction of the reform and the follow-up steps to be taken. Concerns were expressed that the high quality of services should be maintained in the process of the reform and that Member States should be assisted in the transition to the electronic submission and retrieval of documents. The Committee decided to formulate its recommendations on those issues in the proposed draft resolution (see ___).

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II. Calendar of conferences and meetings

D. Requests for exceptions to section I, paragraph 7, of General Assembly resolution 40/243

Introduction and overview

1. At its 451st meeting, on 8 September 2003, the Committee on Conferences considered chapter II, section C, and annex III of the report of the Secretary-General on the pattern of conferences (A/58/194), concerning requests from subsidiary bodies for exceptions to be made to section I, paragraph 7, of General Assembly resolution 40/243, in which the Assembly had decided that no subsidiary organ of the General Assembly might meet at United Nations Headquarters during a regular session of the Assembly unless explicitly authorized by the Assembly.

Discussion

2. The Committee was pleased to learn that the number of requests for exceptions had declined from seven in 2002 to four in 2003. It was noted that the four bodies in question had routinely sought the same exception for the same reasons, which were not likely to change, and the view was expressed that perhaps it would be sensible to grant them a permanent or at any rate a longer-term exception. On the other hand, it was explained that the requirement that subsidiary bodies must make the request for exception on an annual basis had provided the Department for General Assembly and Conference Management with an opportunity to discuss their real conference-servicing needs during a very high-volume period, leading in some cases to a reduction in demand.

Conclusions and recommendations

3. The Committee recommended that the General Assembly explicitly authorize the following bodies to meet in New York during the main part of its fifty-eighth session, on the understanding that all such meetings would be allocated conference services on an as-available basis, from within existing resources, in such a way that the work of the General Assembly and its Main Committees would not be impeded:

- Committee on the Exercise of the Inalienable Rights of the Palestinian People
- Committee on Relations with the Host Country
- Working Group on the Financing of the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East
- Executive Board of the United Nations Children's Fund

4. The Committee noted with satisfaction the reduction in the requests for exceptions.